
The Catholic-National Cauldron

Dominika Macocha

Abstract: This letter is a response by Dominika Macocha to the discussion between Elżbieta Janicka, Konrad Matyjaszek, Xawery Stańczyk, Katrin Stoll and Anna Zawadzka about her video-sculptural installation work 50°31'29.7"N 22°46'39.1"E, 50°30'56.2"N 22°46'01.0"E, 50°30'41.0"N 22°45'49.5"E published in SLH 9 (2020). The discussion has enabled the artist to look at her work from a new perspective, to reflect on it in a critical way and to clarify central issues raised by the discussants. The letter is a testimony to the artist's engagement with the local community which until today lives in the shadow of those Poles who, on their own initiative, murdered Jews during the Shoah. Macocha reveals the current efforts undertaken by several actors, among them the community of Biłgoraj, to cover up the historical fact of the murder of Jews carried out by members of the local population. The letter closes with a reflection on the responsibility of the artist in view of the fact that a revolution of the symbolic system has not yet occurred.

Keywords: Dominika Macocha; antisemitic culture; Holocaust; contaminated landscape; Martin Pollack; Holocaust; Biłgoraj; Poles killing Jews; memory pattern; Christianization; Jewish voice

Dear Ms. Zawadzka,

I am very pleased that the work (Macocha, 2020) has been published, but, above all, that it has been the subject of a discussion (Janicka et al., 2020). This is extremely valuable to me and I would like to thank all the participants involved. The text allowed me to deepen my understanding of the work, take a step back and look at it critically, all of which is of great value, also in the context of future projects. I have lived in Roztocze all this time and I realize that I am immersed in anti-Semitic culture, sometimes certain issues seem transparent and you just don't notice that prism.

Referring to Martin Pollack's book, I kept thinking about the contamination by means of Catholic-national culture and the crimes committed as part of it. Hence the cutting of the chapel, the reference to the geological cross-section which is supposed to reveal a multi-level, compact and dense structure. Glued MDF boards are like geological layers, the cutting allows one to look deep inside the model, analyze it more effectively, break it down into building blocks, and deconstruct it.

Indeed, I had not noticed that contaminated landscapes can be understood differently, as contamination by the Jewish body, and perhaps this kind of interpretation is more common. I doubt that the shrine hanging next to the so-called "Donica" would be an expression of sympathy. Both the fact that it was hung there and that the two remaining places were not commemorated reveal the real attitude of the local community towards the murdered Jews. They were excluded from the human community and

consigned to the field of nature. The chapel is not only an attempt to hide or justify the crime, but also a signal that Jews could only be included in the human community after becoming Christians.

As for my intentions, Elżbieta Janicka's intuitions were the closest. The guide, who did not want to reveal his identity or lend his voice, is an individual who was friends with the son of a woman who brought food from a place called Edwardów to Jews who were hiding, but at the same time he is a member of the murderers' family. Their names appear in the film among the former inhabitants of Kociołki, helpful neighbors... There were three killers. They carried out the crimes personally, without reporting them to the Germans in order to keep any potential Jewish property for themselves alone. I also know that at least one of them was caught by the local partisans and beaten but they ended up freeing him because he bribed them. Recently, I also learned that during the war one of them lived in a presbytery in a village near Biłgoraj. After the war they spent two years in Bydgoszcz after which they returned to the county. My guide was not allowed to inherit, among other things, the property of the murdered Jews, which also included land in the center of Biłgoraj. At one point during the conversation he stated with resentment, "I was left with as much as the Jews". But he forgot about one, small detail, he still had his life. Ultimately, he did not give permission to reveal his name or the names of his family members who took part in the murder.

In 2016, I tried to talk to the son of the woman who delivered the food but he was in the hospital, suffering from a tumor. He admitted that his mother had helped Jews, but did not want to say anything else. In neither Edwardów nor in Biłgoraj was I able to find anyone who would indicate the names of those who directly participated in the murder or the names of the informers.

The additions by Konrad Matyjaszek, especially in the second half of the statement, are unfortunately off target. For that I blame myself because when a professional errs that means the artistic expression of the work was poorly designed.

You won't poison yourself? We were with that clerk/researcher.

Later on it is still about historical institutions/offices. Not about the militia. The clerk/researcher was shown around in the last few years.

I remember the first time I went with my husband to this area and met three people. The first, a woman with children, whom we asked in the vicinity of Edwardów where the Jews had hidden, showed us right away the direction in which we must go and that there would be a chapel there. There were at least two chapels in the immediate area... In Kociołki, right at the ruins of the *gajówka* (a forest cabin where a gamekeeper resides) and near the already mentioned "Donica". The next person, a cyclist we already met in the forest on a hard-packed road, when asked about these types of events, directed us to proceed straight on, but he added that if the Jews were here today they would chop their heads off. You can imagine what we felt then, among the pine trees,

with our hair standing on end. When we arrived in Kociołki, and as I was filming, we met a passerby. I asked him what happened in this area and he said outright that Poles had killed Jews here. I did not turn off my camera then and only when watching the recording later on did I realize that the passerby was Tadeusz Kuźmiński, the initiator of the Miasteczko na Szlaku Kultur Kresowych [Town on the Trail of Borderland Cultures] program. Only after a while did I meet the guide, that I quote in the film, and other people. The “tour” with the guide was also shocking, but instead of diving into the details, I will explain only the last quote in the film. After ploughing through the scrub for a long time, walking along the Biłgoraj river on a hot July day, we reached the place from the third chapter. With my limbs aching from the dense grass, and exhausted by the high temperature, I began tapping my foot on the pits that were there. Then I was brought back to my senses, one might say, by the guide. I felt it was completely inappropriate, but also very symbolic. He said with vitriol “Dominika, stop tapping, because the Jew will wake up. Did you hear? Don’t tap because you will wake the Jew”. I was 25 years old at the time, I did not have to read Gross for it to feel like a bucket of cold water. Perhaps more accurately – a cauldron. A cauldron full of cold water from Czarna Łada where I learned to swim as a child. The last scene [in the film] is an attempt to distance yourself, looking at contemporary culture from a bird’s-eye view.

This involves looking at a culture that shapes the memory of the Holocaust in a special way. The concept of landscape or nature is supposed to hide the evidence and justify “oblivion”. We did not manage to determine the exact location of the shelter from Chapter 2. A hacked up pine tree, which marked the place we were searching for, fell during a storm and someone probably removed it. The area itself was cleared by foresters and new trees were planted. A forest has a certain agency but people have additional intentions that they sometimes try to hide by using the agency of nature. Staring beneath the sun is said to blind.

It might seem that the place from Chapter 3, travel to which involves walking through swamps and shrubs, might have been forgotten precisely because of its inaccessibility. However, as it turns out, even such remote and inaccessible places can be commemorated as long as they follow a particular model of remembrance. In 2020, Catholic Radio Zamość in cooperation with the Biłgoraj Commune made a broadcast called “Świdkowa Górka” about a place with the same name. In this broadcast we hear that

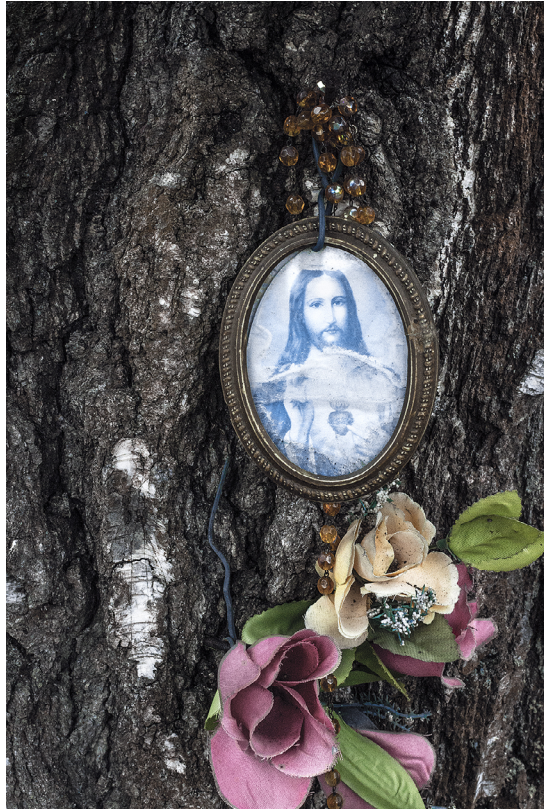
the Biłgoraj commune is a treasury of tradition, culture and history. Many different historical events took place in our area, especially during the Second World War. We, as inhabitants of this land and employees of the commune’s cultural center, together with the historical reconstruction group ‘Wir’ from Biłgoraj, are doing everything we can to save from oblivion the memory of what happened here. Especially given the fact that there are fewer and fewer eyewitnesses to those old events. Therefore, we came up with the idea of introducing the listeners of Catholic Radio Zamość to some of the most important and interesting events, based on the testimonies and accounts of people who experienced them. (*Audycje Gminy Biłgoraj* 2020, n.d.)

The broadcast mentions inhabitants of the surrounding villages who, in July 1943, took refuge here before being deported. Nine of them were killed on the spot by the Germans. During the discussion of these highly important and interesting events, not even a split second was devoted to the history of the Jews murdered there. This is what the “everything” that is supposed to be saved from oblivion looks like. Grand retouching.

There is also something even more disturbing. In June 2021, the Gminny Ośrodek Kultury [Municipal Cultural Center] in Biłgoraj obtained funding for the implementation of a project titled *Kociołki – zaginiona osada leśna* [Kociołki – the lost forest settlement]. A commemorative plaque, information board and a brochure are planned (Świdkowska Górka, n.d.). In issue number 29 of the quarterly *Kultura* (January – March 2019), published by the commune, I found the interview “Life in Edwardów during the war – the memories of Katarzyna Ostrowska”. This is a woman with whom I also talked, but she did not reveal to me the following [details which she shared with the magazine]:

I do not remember the village of Kociołki anymore. But I do remember the cottage that remained, where the foresters lived. At first the local forester was Łęgowicz, after him there was someone else, but only for a short time. Later, during the war, Józef Kuliński was the forester in Kociołki. [...] I heard that Kuliński was hiding Jews on his farm in some hideouts. I remember that I played there with a friend more than once. We would run around the yard. On the other side of the pigpen there was a place for garbage attached to it. Now I'm thinking that they might have been sitting there under that trash. It was a secluded place and good for hiding. There was a lot of garbage thrown there, but what was underneath? (Róg, 2019, p. 26)





The site of the former forest settlement and *gajówka* (gamekeeper's lodge) Kociołki near Biłgoraj, province Lublin, March 30, 2016 (photo by Dominika Macocha)

I wonder, even if there is no one brave enough to finish this story out loud, will there at least be an opportunity for a quotation from the book of remembrance to be heard out loud:

[in] Kociołki between the two places named Smólska (Smólsko Małe and Smólsko Duże) a grave was found under the water, in which there lay the bodies of almost twenty people in rows one on top of the other. Due to the dampness all the dead coalesced into one mass and they had to be extracted with a pitchfork. Among the dead were: Mosze Madel with his wife and daughter, members of the Tober family, the Dornbusts (Fifelech) and others. (Kronenberg, 2009, p. 233)

Will the Jewish voice be included here?

In that same book, we can also read that the Jews from Biłgoraj conducted the exhumation, after being directed to the burial site, with the participation of the Christian community, “they helped us and showed us where the Jews of Biłgoraj died” (Kronenberg, 2009, p. 233). Local residents had knowledge about the crimes and still do, but they are not sharing it with the broader public.

The commune pleads: “help us commemorate people who lived in this small forest village and the *gajówka*” (*Pomóż nam upamiętnić zaginioną osadę i gajówkę Kociołki*, b.d.). There are many indications that Jews lived there as well, but apparently for a rather short period of time and in far different conditions than foresters and partisans who would often stop there. I wrote an email to the municipality and I am curious what “documents, old photos or simply oral information”, which they are publicly requesting, will be incorporated into the information board and brochures.

After receiving the first response I am afraid that the project will likely strengthen the model which, following Jacek Leociak, can be described as a Catholic-national discourse, which

is about nationalization and the Catholicization of the Remembrance of the Holocaust. That is, on the one hand – subordination to the Polish model of remembering the Second World War through martyrdom and heroism, and on the other – the imposition of a religious, that is Catholic, interpretation, explaining both the suffering and death of Jews, as well as the behavior of Poles towards Jews according to one, orthodox model. (Leociak, 2016, pp. 148–149)

In other words, it will continue to frighten.

I keep thinking about the issue that ends your discussion. What means of defense should be used, in my case in the field of visual arts, in order not to weaken the meaning of a work that wants to pursue the revolution you mentioned.

On May 28, 2021, at BWA Wrocław, Joanna Rajkowska and I opened a collective exhibition called “Naked Nerve”. As part of this exhibition I prepared the work “Od deski do deski. Dom Księga”. It is one of four pieces about a former Jewish inn on Lubelska Street in Biłgoraj. More information about the series can be found here: <http://macocha.org/dom>

I had a dispute with Joanna Rajkowska up to the last minute before the opening regarding the form of my work. I know that she is an acclaimed artist and an authority, but I also remember Konrad Matyjaszek's text analyzing her work "Dotleniacz" (Matyjaszek, 2013). I found his remarks accurate and did not want to make a similar mistake. The disagreement concerned the inscription *Suppressio veri*, which I stubbornly wanted to display. But really it concerned the interpretation of the alchemical process she pointed to. I know that describing alchemy as simply turning lead into gold is a simplification, but the context of the destruction of an authentic Jewish home and of investment that aims to capitalize on an incomplete, purged history makes it crucial for me to understand it in this way.

Documentation of the work, together with a film about the development of the piece, can be found here: <http://macocha.org/dom.oddeski>



Photo from the exhibition called "Naked Nerve" in BWA Wrocław, May 28 – September 12, 2021, realized as part of the project by the Studio Mistrzynie: Rajkowska, curatorial cooperation: Anna Mituś (photo: Dominika Macocha)

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Kocioł katolicko-narodowy

Abstrakt: Niniejszy list jest odpowiedzią Dominiki Macochy na dyskusję redakcyjną opublikowaną w numerze 9 (2020) „Studia Litteraria et Historica”, w której udział wzięli Elżbieta Janicka, Konrad Matyjaszek, Xawery Stańczyk, Katrin Stoll i Anna Zawadzka. Dyskusja poświęcona była pracy wideo-rzeźbiarskiej Dominiki Macochy pt. 50°31'29.7"N 22°46'39.1"E, 50°30'56.2"N 22°46'01.0"E, 50°30'41.0"N 22°45'49.5"E. Dyskusja ta skłoniła artystkę do spojrzenia na swoją pracę z nowej, krytycznej perspektywy oraz do sprecyzowania kwestii podniesionych przez dyskutantów. List Dominiki Macochy jest także świadectwem jej zaangażowania w sprawy lokalnej społeczności, żyjącej do dziś w cieniu Polaków, którzy z własnej inicjatywy mordowali Żydów w czasie Zagłady. Macocha opisuje współczesne wysiłki poszczególnych aktorów sytuacji, w tym gminy Biłgoraj, podejmowane w celu ukrycia historycznego faktu mordowania Żydów przez członków lokalnej społeczności. List zamyka refleksja na temat odpowiedzialności artystki wobec faktu, że głęboka zmiana systemu symbolicznego jeszcze się nie dokonała.

Wyrażenia kluczowe: Dominika Macocha; kultura antysemicka; Zagłada; skażone krajobrazy; Martin Pollack; Biłgoraj; Polacy mordujący Żydów; wzory pamięci; chrystianizacja; głos żydowski



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